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ABSTRACT

Questions of how and why early childhood education has come to rely on a psychological perspective are examined and problematic aspects of the discourse of early childhood education are explored. An overview of the history of early education discusses the replacement of idealistic by pragmatic perspectives, the influence of Darwin's use of the scientific method on educators' thought, the emergence of the field of child development, the role of normative studies of children, and the current reliance of early childhood educators on psychological rationales for program design. Subsequent discussion of educational interests and psychological theory initially differentiates the two domains and explores the limitations of the psychological perspective for the educator through a brief analysis of Piaget's work that focuses on decontextualized knowledge, reason and value in psychology, and the metaphoric view of stage theories of development. Concluding discussion deals with perennial problems, such as the nature of appropriate knowledge for the young and the basis for the early childhood educator's professional expertise; future directions are advocated for early educators that would involve a qualitative shift in how and where knowledge is sought and in how they think about themselves, their work, and the children they teach. (RH)

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The Early Childhood Educator's Knowledge Base:

A Reconsideration

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The Early Childhood Educator's Knowledge Base: A Reconsideration

Within the broad domains of educational praxis, people committed to early childhood education have always displayed a unique sense of mission. Recently, Bernard Spodek (1984) invited early childhood educators to renew this sense of mission, this common identity, by examining the history of this field and the issues that have consistently informed its discourse. This chapter was written in response to Spodek's invitation and explores one aspect of this past, the knowledge base upon which early educators have relied for making curricular decisions. Such an exploration is particularly interesting, for, despite the distinct sense of mission possessed by most in the field--perhaps even because of a certain forgetfulness about the history that has shaped the profession--early educators have borrowed heavily from some academic disciplines while totally ignoring others in order to rationalize existing practices and to project new ones.

In the 20th century, the field of early childhood education has been most permeable to the influence of psychologists, and psychology has become its primary "supply" discipline. Thus, theoretical discussions about curricular goals have been predicated upon distinctions within psychological rather than educational paradigms (Kohlberg & Mayer, 1972). Training programs for new teachers have been designed to reflect different approaches to development (Seaver & Cartwright, 1977), teacher thinking has been analyzed in terms of the psychological theory employed by the practitioner (Porter, 1981), and programmatic innovations have been evaluated in terms of developmental appropriateness (Elkind, 1981). This

"psychologistic" orientation became most pronounced in the 1960s with the proliferation of Head Start models. Whether one was a behaviorist advocating a narrowly academic agenda, a Piagetian offering a somewhat broader conception of intellectual growth, or a developmental-interactionist focusing on socioemotional issues, psychological criteria became the basis for educational decision making.

Today, despite some changes in the field, the discourse of early childhood education continues to give precedence to psychological considerations, acknowledging in only a cursory way that other concerns may be of importance (Weber, 1984). But these other concerns, referred to as philosophical or value-related, rarely as economically or politically relevant, seldom receive full treatment in the literature. For example, Evans (1982), in his description of the components of early childhood programs, states that these programs' theoretical foundations rest equally in philosophical and psychological thought. But when he refers to the terms currently used to identify different models, he unwittingly reveals the dominance of the latter over the former:

> Over time, however, certain bodies of consistent, integrated thought about philosophy and psychology have come to dominate curriculum models for early childhood education. The bodies of thought are identified by various labels, such as the behaviorist, dynamic and constructivist approaches...(p. 110)

It is the purpose of this chapter to examine how and why this reliance on a psychological perspective has come about, as well as to suggest what might be considered problematic in the current state of affairs: the way that the psychological lens focuses our regard in some

directions and not in others, the implicit value structures of developmental perspectives, and the implications of misconstruing psychological goals and categories for educational ones. In a more general way, this chapter examines how the special sense of mission and the identity that undergirds the profession have functioned for early educators in the past and questions how the field might best be served in the future.

Historical Perspective

Understanding the present begins with interpreting the past. The beginnings of early education might be traced to the 16th century and the recognition that young children are not simply immature adults or to the publication of important pedagogical treatises by Comenius, Locke, and Rousseau acknowledging the importance of the early years. However, it was Froebel's work that most surely catalyzed the early education movement in America. A man of deep religious convictions, Froebel claimed to base his program on a series of revealed truths--the unity of life, whole/part relations, the interconnection of all things, and the law of opposites. He designed a series of pedagogical apparatuses and exercises, the gifts and occupations, to symbolize these truths and to make them evident to children. As a rationalist, Froebel was less concerned with teaching specific content than with helping children to recognize universal values. He conceived of education as a process of "unfoldment" through which children were given the opportunity to make the inner outer and the outer inner.

A challenge to the Froebelian kindergarten ultimately was mounted during the last decade of the 19th century by those for whom scientific method and direct observation took precedence over religious conviction and intuited forms of knowledge. Based in a philosophy of pragmatism rather than idealism, the progressives believed that the early childhood

curriculum should be built on psychological rather than logical principles. They were convinced that real experiences expressing the immediate interests of children, rather than symbolic materials revealing eternal verities, should form the core of curriculum and that the teacher should act as democratic guide rather than as authoritarian director of activities. According to the reformers, schools should help children learn appropriate behavior through social interaction and the reconstruction of experience rather than through the imitation of moral models. Thus, the progressive educators wanted not only to change the very look and feel of the early childhood classroom but also to modify the knowledge base on which it was constructed.

The shift from a religious/philosophical knowledge base to a secular/psychological one was consistent with the 19th-century demand for scientific legitimation in all fields of endeavor. It might also be said to have been imminent in the 1859 publication of Darwin's The Origin of Species just 3 years after the opening of the first German-language kindergarten in America. Although it was Darwin's use of the scientific method that shaped the intellectual mind-set of the century, it was the popularity of evolutionary theory itself that created new interest in the mental life of children. The concept of change over time as a progressive evolution from primitive to sophisticated structural forms was extended from biology, to anthropology, to child study. Borrowing from the embryologists, educators asserted that, just as individual members of a species repeat the stages of evolution experienced by their phyla in prenatal development, so humans after birth recapitulate the stages of cultural change undergone by humankind as a whole. This assertion made for an inevitable equation of the primitive with the childlike that had

political implications for non-European people and pedagogical ramifications for children (Gould, 1981). Thus, to be meaningful and efficient, education had to be child-centered, or based on the developmentally determined interests of the child.

In the United States, it was G. Stanley Hall's child study movement, with its emphasis on the direct observation of children and questionnaire inquiries rather than intuited insights or introspective recall of childhood memories, that provided the knowledge of children upon which appropriate educational environments were to be structured. Although signaling the acceptance of what later was to be called the child development point of view, child study itself soon lost ground to the new science of child development. Child development psychologists wanted to create a more rigorous approach to data collection by employing objective, quantitative measures; standardized testing techniques; and experimental laboratory procedures. They sought acceptance by the more traditional sciences through the use of such positivist methodologies and through disassociating themselves from the more practical concerns of educators and parents. The professionalization of child study clearly involved a growing distinction between those who produced knowledge about children and those who were to use such knowledge (Takanishi, 1981). This expert/implementer dichotomy and the hierarchy of functions that goes along with it appears to be an inescapable outcome of positivist science and the technical-mindedness that pervades education today (Fay, 1975).

In the 20th century, the field of early education has reflected a particular permeability to the knowledge created by psychologists. The 1920s, for example, saw the dominance of behaviorist theories of learning and the measurement movement, as well as concern for the formation of

proper habits. Although this influence remained strong in the kindergarten, perhaps because it seemed well-suited to programs designed to prepare children for the elementary grades, during the 1930s other early childhood institutions, such as the nursery school, were more affected by the dissemination of Freudian theory. Then, in the 1940s and 1950s, the role of normative studies of children such as those done by Gesell at Yale firmly took hold. The use of such normative studies marks the success of the well-articulated child development point of view. As defined by Jersild (1946), this meant

> an effort to apply to the education of children lessons learned from the study of children themselves. Research in child development has provided many findings which have implications for education...But the child development approach does not represent merely a collection of facts. It represents a point of view.
>
> Basic to this point of view is a spirit of inquiry--a desire to learn about the ways of children...with this spirit of inquiry goes an attitude of respect for children at all stages of their growth. (p. 182)

Today, it is the literature of psychological development that remains the primary base from which educational decisions about young children in school are made. That is, despite the pervasive shift in the 1960s and 1970s to more cognitively oriented curricula and the somewhat less prominent role given to socioemotional adjustment, early educators continue to rely almost exclusively on psychological rationales for program design. The substitution of Piaget for Gesell and Berlyne for Freud, may change the specifics of the early childhood knowledge base, but it does not alter

the terrain in which it is located. As Bettye Caldwell (1984), past president of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, confidently summarized, "Our field represents the applied side of the basic science of child development" (p. 53).

Educational Interests and Psychological Theory

For some, the role of psychology in education has been seen as more problematic. For example, Spodek (1970) makes an important distinction between curriculum sources and resources, noting that, while the former are "a set of goals which are the aims of education" (p. 6), the latter are only a means to help achieve these ends. Among the resources are certainly developmental theory and learning theory. Egan (1983), in a more extensive analysis, has asserted that the specific function of educational theory, as opposed to psychological theory, is to tell us how to design curricula to produce educated people. A deceptively simple definition, at its core is a concern for the kind of person who will result from the educational process. To project the nature of the end product of education, the educated person, is to project the kind of context in which this person can reach his or her full potential. A theory of education is not only a theory of individual growth but also a theory of political and social power. If the goal of education is to inculcate the knowledge and skills that will prepare persons to be successful political and social agents, then it must be informed by a sense of the polis that the student will eventually enter.

In Egan's view, psychological theory is not only different from but secondary to educational theory. The former becomes meaningful only as it is part of the latter. In fact, the role of education is to shape the forces that produce psychological regularities, not to be bound by them.

This situation is the case because psychological research is concerned with behaviors and thoughts that are the result of personal and historical experience. Psychology reflects what has been and what is, but not necessarily what ought to be. Psychologists, whose goal is the pursuit of knowledge, can afford to isolate particular skills or characteristics for study and can at least claim to be objective in their practices. The work of educators, on the other hand, is more clearly culture-bound and value-saturated because it prepares children to live within specific communities and traditions. Thus, it must not be concerned only with cognitive and socioemotional skills but also with erudition.

Educated people need to be able to think clearly and make wise choices as to what they will think about. But many still believe that knowledge about early education settings should be created by psychologists rather than by educators themselves. This belief undoubtedly has contributed to the tension that exists between practitioner and researcher (Katz, 1977). Because educators are the lower status group, supposedly concerned with practice rather than theory, it has been too easily assumed that their interests might be subsumed under the interests of the more prestigious group. However, those who choose to see early childhood education as a unique cultural system with its own history, tradition, and values suggest otherwise (Takanishi, 1981). They point out that, because early educators go through a specific socialization process, they see children and development differently from child development specialists. And because they work in classrooms, rather than laboratories, they have a different perspective on what is essential in order to understand early education settings and even possess alternative conceptions of education itself.

The Piagetian Paradigm

Perhaps the limitations of the psychological perspective for the educator can best be understood through a brief analysis of Piaget's work (Piaget, 1954). Becoming popular at a time of mounting concern over math/science education and growing interest in the open classroom, Piaget's theories are now a pervasive influence in early childhood education. More than psychodynamic theory, with its limited implications for curriculum design, or behavior modification strategies, which have been confined to specific program models, Piagetian constructs have directly affected a wide variety of early childhood programs. And although Piaget's theory is clearly exceptional in its richness and complexity, its very popularity speaks as much to its uniqueness as to its representation of widely accepted assumptions about development. Criticisms of Piaget's work also underline the difficulty of producing objective, definitive research about subjects who are by nature immature, unstable, and not given to the controls of experimental procedures.

Decontextualized knowledge. In the 1920s, when Piaget's work first was translated into English, mainstream American psychology was dominated by behaviorism and procedures relying on quantitative data for validation. Piaget's structuralist hypotheses and clinical method were inimicable to these principles. His writings did not find a very large audience.

Ironically, it was an English educator, Susan Isaacs (1966), working not from a behaviorist position but from a psychoanalytic one, who offered the most trenchant commentary on Piaget's method. Her concerns were not that Piaget's findings lacked the corroboration of large-scale studies, but rather that the clinical interview itself did not promote the optimum

use of the child's intelligence. Isaacs believed that many of the interview questions tested the possession of specific pieces of information rather than the ability to reason, as Piaget claimed. In the interview, questions were asked of children, not by them, and were thus suggestive of particular answers and related to limited, stereotyped situations. Children's intelligent thought was not revealed because children were neither naturally interested nor motivated to seek answers to questions raised by others. Alternatively, Isaacs suggested that reason was best studied in real-life situations where it arose spontaneously in response to the child's desire to find out about the world and to solve meaningful problems.

In a more recent work, Donaldson (1978) reviews a series of experiments that replicated, with slight but important modifications, those done by Piaget on decentering, class inclusion, deductive thought, and conservation (Piaget, 1954). She concluded that children's success in these experiments was influenced by their knowledge of language, their assessment of what the experimenter intended, and the manner in which they would represent the situation to themselves whether or not the experimenter was actually present. Performance level was affected by minor changes in language, format, apparatus, and procedure. Failure to deal successfully with many tasks, according to Donaldson, reflects the adult's inability to decenter, to understand the world from the child's viewpoint, and not necessarily the child's inability to use reason. Donaldson's findings, consistent with Isaacs' earlier assertions, suggest that Piaget's conclusions are ill-founded because children fail to grasp the nature of the problem being presented to them, or the problem is irrelevant and they lack appropriate motivation to seek an adequate answer to it. Although

Isaacs and Donaldson have similar criticisms of Piaget, these lead Isaacs to insist on the role of the school as supporting the child's learning in the context of his or her ongoing experiences. They suggest to Donaldson that the school must articulate and provide more direct instruction in the abstract, disembedded forms of thought valued by Piaget and society at large.

Egan (1983), in a more broadly based analysis of Piaget's work, deals with some of the conceptual questions implied but left unexplored by Donaldson. He raises doubts as to whether Piaget described a natural, universal pattern of development, as claimed, or whether he described only that which was the result of particular methods of sociocultural initiation. Egan marshalls cross-cultural evidence to suggest that Piaget's stages are not universal or invariant in sequence; this evidence casts doubt on Piaget's explanations of why children at certain stages can perform some tasks but not others--specifically on the ambiguous role attributed to experience and the meaning of decalage. If, as Egan maintains, Piaget's stages reflect a logical rather than a psychological necessity, then they are not amenable to proofs from empirical data at all, and their scientific validity is again thrown into question. Further, Egan's analysis leads him to be skeptical about educational commonplaces drawn from Piaget's theory such as the active nature of learning, the importance of readiness, and the assessment of individual differences.

Reason and values in psychology. As a group, the authors discussed so far are representative of those who have questioned Piaget's method, his resultant database, and the nature of his theory qua theory. In a more general way, they provoke us to examine how psychological research is conducted and to question whether its methods are consistent

with the more contextualized, less fragmented ways early educators experience growing children. There are others, however, who are less concerned with methodological issues than with the emphasis given to logico-mathematical structures in Piaget's work. These commentators help us to recognize the fact that competing schools within developmental psychology focus on different aspects of human potential and contain alternative world views.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Piaget's theory, with its concern for the development of rational modes of thought, has arisen in a world dominated by technological accomplishments and scientific approaches to the management of human problems. What Piaget's theory excludes from consideration are nonrational, but not necessarily irrational, modes of thought: intuitive, mythical, religious. This omission is not a neutral exclusion; a definite value system is operative in the Piagetian framework. Take, for example, Piaget's understanding of symbolic play (Piaget, 1962). For him, play is a function of underdeveloped thinking processes. Play is significant when young children's needs to assimilate information, to distort reality to conform to their existing picture of the world, is greatest. As their cognitive structures become more adequate, as they accommodate more to reality, children enter the period of concrete operations, when they lose their need to engage in symbolic play and become interested in rule-governed games. To Piaget, imaginative play is a compensatory activity rather than a source of new concepts or ideas and is clearly irrelevant to adult functioning.

Piaget is concerned with directed rather than with creative, imaginative, or divergent forms of thought. Play is therefore interpreted as an epiphenomenon, with no inherent value, though admittedly it may serve a

cathartic purpose in the emotional lives of the young. In contrast to this view, others (Herron & Sutton-Smith, 1971) see play as a primary phenomenon, as an essential mode of being in childhood, with its own structures, purposes, and sources for generating novel ideas. If play is considered an end in itself, it may represent an irreducible challenge to contemporary values. That is, because play is a nonproductive, pleasure-oriented, aesthetic activity, it may be seen to threaten a society built on material production, repression, and control. To some (Alves, 1972), play expresses the child's refusal to be organized by adult conceptions of reality.

To accept the Piagetian epistemology as the basis for educational programming is to accept a particular conception of what is essential to human development and to success in adult life. This conception is most consistent with a highly rationalized, scientifically oriented culture. To accept Piaget is to accept his belief that intelligent action is the human expression of the biological process of adaptation (Piaget, 1950). The implication is that education, in promoting intelligent behavior, promotes adaptation to the environment. In the end, every psychology is embedded not only in a world view but also in a politic, and the politics of adaptation are certainly not the politics of resistance or revolution.

Those, like Merleau-Ponty (1964), who are critical of the key role given to logico-mathematical reasoning in Piagetian theory raise issues that have general implications for the use of any theory of development in the determination of educational contexts. First, they point to the way that psychological theories define our perspectives, shape our interpretations of common childhood activities, and contain specific value judgments. Second, they call to our attention the fact that psychological

theories exist within the framework of the positivist sciences. As a knowledge base, the exclusive use of such theories devalues alternative ways of knowing children--aesthetic, symbolic, imaginative. Whereas educational decisions are based, or should be based, on more than our knowledge of children, it is how and what we choose to know about children that is immediately in question.

The developmental metaphor. Finally, a third group of Piaget's critics can be connected by their common concern for the way that his stage theory of development functions to assure an absolute distinction between childhood and adulthood. Merleau-Ponty (1964), for example, suggests that the Piagetian conception of cognitive structures sacrifices the immediate, visceral knowledge of self and others that we possess before being overwhelmed by language and rules of perception. He believes that Piaget's hierarchy of stages posits an artificial separation of children from adults. Merleau-Ponty prefers to look for continuities, the child as neither absolute other nor as exactly the same as ourselves. Such continuity comes from assuming the centrality of preconceptual knowledge, knowledge that is neither objective nor subjective but that emerges through direct participation in the world. This is knowledge that allows us to know both the child in the classroom and the child within ourselves.

In recent years, growing numbers of early childhood educators have come to view stage theories of development more metaphorically than literally (Weber, 1984). While this trend probably closely reflects scientific thinking, it throws into question the usefulness of curriculum design and the meaning of such theories to the educator.

If Piaget's perspective is one that ultimately sees children as incomplete beings, falling short of adult standards of functioning, part of the explanation lies in his belief in the superiority of reason over other forms of knowing. But part of the explanation also resides in the basic metaphor of development itself. This is a metaphor borrowed from the biological sciences; its use implies not only a continuity of physical and psychological growth but also an adult-centered perspective in relation to children. Research making this assumption begins with a set of adult characteristics, usually defined by middle-class Western standards of maturity, and examines growth as progress toward the achievement of these characteristics (Speier, 1976). The imposition of these standards is rationalized through the further assumption that, because developmental processes are biologically based and best exemplified in Piaget's assimilation/accommodation model of adaptation, they are also universal. Although environment or experience may affect the speed of development, the attainment of higher levels of thought, or even the way that specific tasks are accomplished, the sequence of stages and the laws of development are assumed to be cross-culturally valid.

Perennial Problems in Early Childhood Education

When educators rely on psychologists such as Piaget for their knowledge base, they may be avoiding difficult philosophical and social issues while believing themselves to be acting in a "professional" manner. They also may be succumbing to a subtle, but nonetheless potent, form of technical-mindedness because they are taking educational decision-making out of the realm of moral and political consideration where it more properly belongs. Early educators are particularly vulnerable to this form of instrumental rationality because they tend to regard themselves as

objective, if well-intentioned, protectors of the young and because they are members of a low-status field seeking to improve its position in a society that places primacy on scientific knowledge (Silin, 1982). Age-related differences should not be obscured in developing educational environments; nonetheless, what age means needs to be explored from many perspectives, and knowledge about how people change over time should be part of an articulated social philosophy.

The absence of such a social theory component in early childhood programs underlines the limits of the current knowledge base and contributes to two perennial problems. The first is the ongoing issue of curriculum content for young children. The nature of appropriate knowledge for the young, often ill-defined, has been a source of controversy among early educators (Evans, 1982). Diverse conceptions of the child's developmental abilities, concerns, and needs have led to differing approaches to curriculum design (Maccoby & Zellner, 1970). But perhaps it is the overriding preoccupation with developmental correctness itself that has left early educators without clear guidelines for content selection. If education is about initiating the young into an already existing world, if it is to teach them not only how to live but also what the world is really like, then psychological process considerations are probably insufficient to the task.

The second problem is very much intertwined with the first since it involves the basis for the educator's professional expertise. Is such expertise grounded in the educator's knowledge of child development, understanding of materials, ability to teach correct school behaviors, or nurturing personality? Beside these usual conceptions, given the nature of educational theory proposed here, professional knowledge might also be

grounded in a sociopolitical analysis of society or an ethical vision of the world in which the child will one day participate. But the reliance on psychological research for validating program decisions and the resultant ambiguity about content and traditional conceptualizations of the teacher's role (Almy, 1975) mediate against such considerations in early childhood thinking. The reaction, or lack thereof, to the growing body of literature looking at education from a critical social theory perspective exemplifies this attempt to keep the field clear of any debates in which its self-declared mandate to protect the young might be questioned. The limited response of early childhood educators to political critiques of education also may be explained in terms of weaknesses in the analyses themselves (i.e., their failure to address early education, the self-image of early childhood educators, and gender-related social expectations of female professionals) (Silin, 1985).

Although sensitive to public demands for greater emphasis on the academic potential of young children, early educators have tended to ignore or to deem irrelevant the criticisms coming from educational historians and sociologists in the late 1960s. This was the period when revisionist historians (Katz, 1971; Tyack, 1974) described the failure of the schools to promote social mobility, equality of opportunity, and democratic forms of interaction--and when radical critics of the schools (Illich, 1970; Kohl, 1967) focused on issues of depersonalization, apathy, and alienation within educational institutions. It was also a time when educationists (Giroux, 1980; Macdonald, 1975) concerned themselves with the nature of curricula, overt and covert, and the way curricula were being structured to fulfill the socioeconomic needs of the post-industrial world.

It is true that, for a brief period during the War on Poverty, early educators tried to address the issue of the relationships among social class, curriculum, and schooling outcomes. This interest took the form of a debate over the nature of compensatory education. While some (Bereiter & Engelmann, 1966) argued that children of the poor needed more academically oriented programs in order to catch up to their middle class peers, others (Biber, Shapiro, & Wickens, 1971) maintained that all children, regardless of background, benefitted from the same kind of developmentally oriented approach. From the beginning of this debate, a few (Lazerson, 1971) were skeptical of the ability of educators to effect changes that were more properly required in the economic system outside the classroom. The majority of educators, however, seemed to have been caught up in the belief that education could in fact equalize opportunity and create a more just society. This early enthusiasm has quickly tempered, and interest in compensatory education has since been subsumed under discussions of the value of bilingual and multicultural programs, thus masking economic issues. Even within minority groups, disagreement exists about whether schools should stress unique cultural histories and personal meanings or public knowledge and academic skills (Rodriguez, 1982). Although the former may better enable children to tell their own stories and to be at home in the culture of their birth, the latter may better prepare them to survive in the larger society.

The beginnings of the Head Start and Follow Through programs may be attributed less to a recognition of underlying systemic weaknesses than to the limited acknowledgment that problems existed in the society at large for which education could compensate. To early educators, the need for revised curricula was not so much an indictment of existing curricula as a

return to an older theme of the field--the amelioration of social ills through education. Indeed, a concern for bettering the circumstances of the poor was one of the distinguishing characteristics of those who first created early childhood programs; this theme connects the work of such diverse individuals as Rachel and Margaret Macmillan, Maria Montessori, Robert Owen, and Johann Pestalozzi. The new research on the importance of the early years for later cognitive development (Bloom, 1964; Hunt, 1961) could easily be used as a rationale for revamping programs. A more political indictment of the system qua system might thus be avoided: the revisionist critique need not apply.

Future Directions

Early childhood education is a unique field of study and action whose practitioners often possess a strong sense of mission. At the level of the individual teacher, teacher-educator, or researcher, this sense of mission usually is expressed in the belief that young children require special forms of nurturance and care. But as members of a collective enterprise, it is important for early childhood educators to recognize the degree to which such an identity is embedded in the history of a field with its own socializing institutions, sites of practice, and tools of instruction. It also is important to recognize the nature of the knowledge base that has been used to guide both theory and practice. It seems clear that, if early childhood educators are to attain the professional recognition they deserve and if they are to maintain their distinct identity within the larger educational sphere, they must strengthen the knowledge base from which they work.

To broaden the early childhood knowledge base is to accept that schooling, even nursery schooling, is one of the central ways that our

society organizes power and influence. It is also to acknowledge that early education should not be exempt from a more political analysis of its programs than has hitherto taken place. From this perspective, teaching needs to be viewed as more than the professionalization of a maternal function that takes place in a protective, hermetically sealed vacuum. Rather, teaching must be seen in the context of larger societal processes that both shape and are shaped by it. In one of the few attempts to assess the economic implications of the expansion of early education, Chamboredon and Prevort (1975) stress the need for such a change in our thinking:

> The conditions for understanding nursery-school exercises flow from the conditions for inventing these exercises...The proper objective of a sociology of nursery-school practice is the analysis of the lag between the functions delegated to the school by different social classes and the functions which it objectively tends to fulfill. (p. 334)

Drawing on sources from sociology, philosophy, and history, as well as from psychology, early childhood educators might then move away from their traditional developmental, "individual needs" language, which frequently masks the real impact of their work. An undue emphasis on individual development and change can lead to a neglect of the need for transformation of the social and economic realities of everyday life and to a denial of the teacher's potential as a political actor. Even the smallest pedagogical acts may have meanings for students that extend beyond the classroom. If teachers are to be more fully in control of their professional lives, they must assess these meanings and incorporate them into their knowledge base.

Using universal, theoretical constructs also may obfuscate the complex realities of children's lives. Literature and the arts may therefore provide much-needed access to direct ways of knowing children and understanding childhood. Such investigations undoubtedly will lead to a renewed respect for the common ground between children and adults so frequently hidden in hierarchically organized stage theories of development. A few theorists within the field of early education already have begun to move in such a direction by emphasizing the uniqueness and integrity of each child. In this phenomenological approach,

> the existential moment-by-moment environmental interaction of the learner supersedes an interest in--even a recognition of--developmental factors. The departure from stage theory is due in part to discomfiture with a designated end point for all children. (Weber, 1984, p. 206)

To take such a position is also to acknowledge that education is a form of moral persuasion embodying values, promoting ways of being, and teaching ethical behaviors that are less subject to the laws of empirical validation than to the rigors of democratic discourse and the difficulties of intersubjective communication.

Most significantly, early childhood specialists need to create their own research base (Caldwell, 1984). This would be a research literature that looked directly to child care workers to define questions for investigation, to corroborate findings, and to insure practical meaning. To create such a knowledge base, early educators would need to rely less on positivistic methods of quantitative research and more on qualitative methods employing ethnographic standards, interpretive interviews, and participant observations. The former approach appears to be antithetical

to early childhood needs because it assumes a hierarchically structured research process that distances the researcher from the objects of study. On the other hand, the latter approach promotes a greater collaborative effort by both researcher and informant. Good qualitative research also respects the complexity of the teaching/learning situation and acknowledges the whole person, purposes, and knowledge of the teacher. This is an approach consistent with the best traditions of the field.

This is a long agenda that involves early childhood educators in examining how they think about themselves, their work, and the children they teach. It has implications for those preparing new teachers to take their places in the classrooms of the future, those already there, and those engaged in the study of teaching. Although we live in a society where rapid change is more and more taken for granted, where our lives are transformed daily by technological innovations, change that involves qualitative shifts in how and where we seek knowledge are less quickly accomplished, if ever. But not to work toward such a change is to accept the technocratic definition of our moral and political problems and to assume that the future must repeat the past.

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